Left for dead: How America fails the missing and unidentified

By G.W. Schulz (https://www.revealnews.org/author/gwschulz) / September 2, 2015

HARLAN, Ky. – There's no easy way to reach the wooded hillside with an excavator, so the plan is to dig her up by hand, one spade of Kentucky dirt at a time. That's how she went into the earth 45 years ago, and that's how she's coming back out.

"Mountain Jane Doe," as some locals know her, was stabbed to death (https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2299416-mountain-jane-doe-death-certificate.html) in 1969 and left naked in the woods near town. She was buried quickly without a name in a cemetery surrounded by slender oak and poplar trees at the edge of a steep, rutted trail called Red Dog Road.

In the decades since, the young woman became little more than a ghost story. She was a murder victim believed to be from somewhere else whose badly decayed remains offered too few hints about her identity long before DNA science and other forensic methods became widely available.

On the day before Thanksgiving last year, Todd Matthews, a onetime factory worker from Livingston, Tennessee, stood in the frigid morning air near the grave, waiting for the Kentucky State Police and a local coroner to arrive with shovels and pickaxes.

Todd Matthews, spokesman and director of case management for the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, was at the exhumation of Mountain Jane Doe last November in Harlan, Ky.

CREDIT: SCOTT ANGER FOR REVEAL

Matthews first earned public attention in 1998 for using the Internet to help identify another slain Kentucky woman who went unnamed for three decades.

Since then, police investigators and forensic scientists nationwide have come to know Matthews for his Appalachian accent, relentless optimism and determined advocacy for the thousands of unidentified bodies in morgues and cemeteries across the U.S. On this day, Matthews' goal was to retrieve Mountain Jane Doe's DNA to compare with that of several families still hoping to find a loved one who went missing.

"We have every reason in the world to be here today," he said. "It just took 45 years to get here."

Work began early. By 8 a.m., the first rusted evidence of a casket appeared. No one could tell for sure whether it was a hinge or handle, but the group buzzed with anticipation.

An official from the Kentucky State Police digs at an exhumation last November in Harlan, Ky.

CREDIT: SCOTT ANGER FOR REVEAL

Also standing graveside in the chill was Darla Jackson, an amateur historian and local mortuary owner with thick ribbons of raven-black hair framing her face. She had written a book (http://www.lulu.com/shop/darla-jackson/harlan-county-haunts/paperback/product-5066919.html) about local ghost stories and unusual tales from Harlan's past that included Mountain Jane Doe, which helped build the momentum for exhuming her remains.

"I was born in 1969, the year her body was discovered," she said. "My family even back then took an interest in it. I can remember my grandparents speaking about it. I can remember going berry-picking with my grandfather where she was found."

Jackson's uncle often insisted that he'd seen the ghost of Mountain Jane Doe while living in a trailer near her grave – less an evil apparition than the presence of a victim.

Philip Bianchi was at the dig, too. A local funeral-home owner like Jackson and the elected coroner of Harlan County, he issued the order (https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2299417-mountain-jane-doe-coroners-order.html) for Mountain Jane Doe to be exhumed. Kentucky law didn't provide him with much guidance, however. State statutes say only that coroners can conduct an exhumation if "a person who is dead and buried died from poisoning or other illegal cause." They say nothing about whether he could dig up someone in pursuit of clues to determine an identity.

Bianchi said that for years he had discussed with state police the possibility of exhuming Mountain Jane Doe, but he was unsure what the law allowed.

"I went for a long time thinking, 'I can't do anything until the judge sends down an order,' " Bianchi said. A judge finally told him that as coroner, he could issue the order himself.

As the gravesite deepened, it became clear that much of the casket beneath had been devoured by the earth. The group was unsure with each clink of their tools whether they were striking rocks, tree roots or bone.

Mountain Jane Doe and more than 10,000 others like her make up a bleak national list of people found deceased without an identity. The FBI estimates there are some 80,000 people missing on any given day.

The toll goes beyond the missing and the unnamed. Their mothers and fathers, wives and husbands, brothers and sisters have no idea what happened to them. Killers could still be on the loose.

“They’re living a tragedy, and it just never goes away,” Matthews said. “In a missing persons case, it’s like a funeral that goes on for years, sometimes decades, and I don’t know how these people do it.”

Details about the missing and unidentified dead are recorded in a growing but voluntary federal database called the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (https://identifyus.org/en), or NamUs, housed at the Center for Human Identification at the University of North Texas in Fort Worth, where Matthews has risen from amateur Web sleuth to spokesman and director of case management.

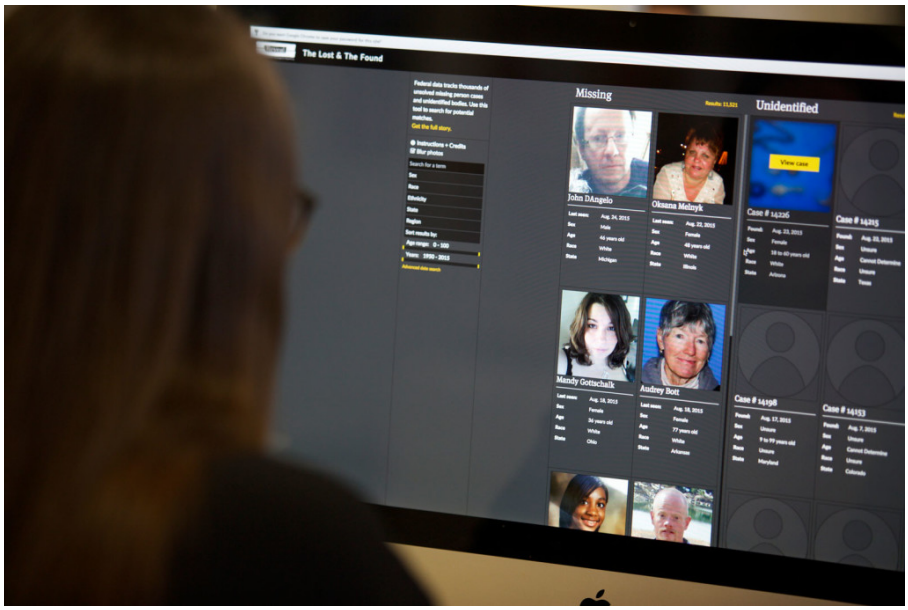
Never before has such a comprehensive portrait of these Jane and John Does been available to the public. Launched in 2007 with help from the Justice Department, NamUs operates similar to a dating site, suggesting compatibility among cases. Medical examiners and coroners upload information about a person who is dead and unknown, and a list of possible matches to missing persons reports appears based on a number of criteria – hair color, height and date the individual went missing, for example.

Authorities then must decide whether to take the next step and compare DNA or dental records. Members of the public can search, too, and contact investigators if they think they’ve found a match. The database contains thousands of clues, including locations, dates, physical descriptions, photographs taken post-mortem and more.

NamUs is a tremendous resource for law enforcement and families of the missing, but its potential often is wasted. Reveal found that neglect, indifference and a lack of will by many state and local authorities – police, medical examiners and others – hinder the identification of Jane and John Does. Law enforcement agencies across the country have let solvable cold cases languish, only to have public citizens piece together answers on their own.

NamUs also presents its own challenges. Some complain that the public Web interface is not intuitive and that it’s difficult to directly compare the missing with the unidentified dead. Reveal built a tool (http://lostandfound.revealnews.org/) that streamlines searches of NamUs information and allows side-by-side comparisons.

(//lostandfound.revealnews.org)



HELP MAKE A MATCH

Help match the missing and unidentified through our Web tool, The Lost & The Found (http://lostandfound.revealnews.org/), which allows you to search NamUs data, including photos and other details, side by side. More information is available about how to use this tool (https://www.revealnews.org/article/faq-tips-on-using-our-searchable-database) and what to do if you have a missing loved one (https://www.revealnews.org/article/what-to-do-when-someone-goes-missing).

Although authorities often claim that they do not have the funds to exhume bodies and conduct DNA analysis, advances in forensic science have both reduced the cost and increased the chances of making matches.

Many times, the unidentified turn up in the very communities from which they vanished, but years or even decades pass as loved ones await answers. Across jurisdictional lines where agencies aren't compelled to share information, the problem worsens.

"Probably one of the lowest priorities you have is the remains of someone who's not a homicide victim or who's not related to anyone in the jurisdiction where they were found," said Jerry Nance, who led the cold case unit at the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children for 14 years.

In the years that followed her discovery, Mountain Jane Doe became that last priority.

Todd Matthews (left), a Kentucky state trooper (center) and Harlan County Coroner Philip Bianchi compare a bone found at the exhumation site in Harlan with an example in a forensic manual.

CREDIT: SCOTT ANGER FOR REVEAL

At her gravesite last fall, the work progressed slowly and methodically. Soil-stained bones began to emerge two and a half hours into the dig, and each was placed into a long, slender cardboard evidence box large enough to hold a hunting rifle.

A state trooper called out from the grave three hours into the exhumation: "I think I got the head right here. There's the chin." The hole was now several feet deep. The team carefully worked to dislodge the skull from the packed ground with a crowbar as pitted eye sockets stared out. Over the decades, mud had moved in and around the skull, protecting it from collapse.

Matthews took photos on his smartphone and texted them to a retired forensic anthropologist for the state of Kentucky, who responded that at first glance, the individual appeared younger than authorities had estimated (http://lostandfound.revealnews.org/?ordering=Sort+results+by%3A&age=0+-+100&start_date=01%2F01%2F1950&end_date=12%2F31%2F2015&unidentifiedperson=5880) Mountain Jane Doe to be in 1969.

It wouldn't be the last surprise.

Cases in a deep freeze

Every day across America, people report their missing loved ones to police. Medical examiners and coroners enter what information they can into autopsy reports when human remains cannot be identified. Over time, many from both lists are forgotten.

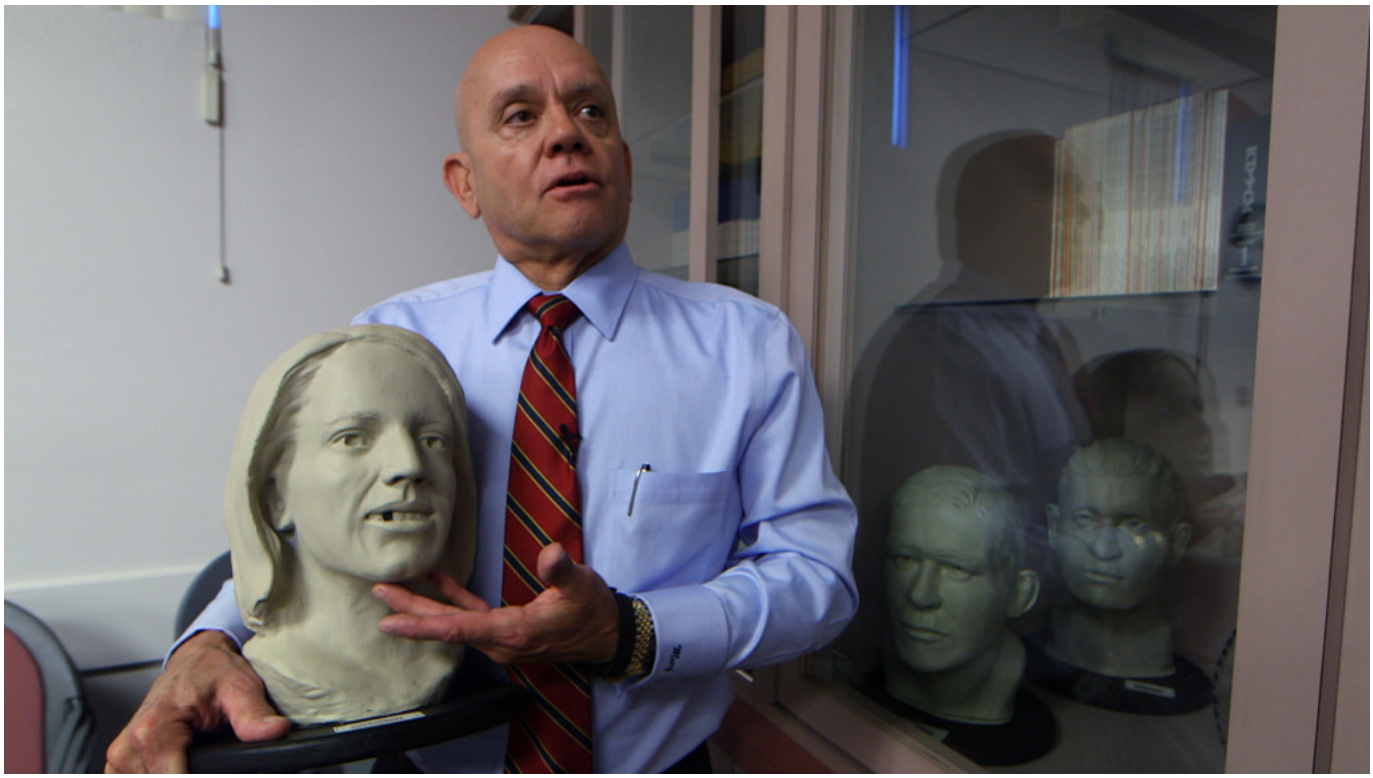
Some Jane and John Doe cases aren't just cold – they're in deep freeze. Reveal submitted dozens of open-government requests for records to state and local agencies, conducted more than 100 interviews with experts and the families of missing people and victims, and examined thousands of pages of case files from around the United States. The work sometimes required exhaustive and fruitless battles with police over access to records that might not have been revisited in years.

Not every missing person is reported. Police may turn away attempts to do so or are slow to act on the reports. Case information can be lost or destroyed. Authorities might not use or even know about systems like NamUs. They move on to other cases that are more timely or urgent, assume other departments or jurisdictions are responsible, or complain about costs.

The answer to many Jane and John Doe cases might be sitting in different filing cabinets or databases, separated only by jurisdiction or login credentials. But digital technology and modern forensics are diminishing the excuses for not doing more. Specialized laboratories often will provide anthropological examinations, DNA analyses and other forensic services at little or no expense if authorities just ask for help.

Even when victims are known to police, investigators' ability to successfully crack homicide cases has worsened (http://www.npr.org/2015/03/30/395069137/open-cases-why-one-third-of-murders-in-america-go-unresolved) in recent decades, according to official (https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2013/crime-in-the-u.s.-2013/offenses-known-to-law-enforcement/clearances/clearancetopic_final) and unofficial (http://www.murderdata.org/) figures voluntarily reported by state and local police.

There were 1,881 cases in NamUs labeled as homicides as of June, according to data obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. For another 5,517, the manner of death was undetermined or not listed. As of Aug. 1, there were 916 Jane and John Does listed as children and young adults in the system.



Former Las Vegas Coroner Michael Murphy discusses the facial reconstruction process used to identify human remains.

CREDIT: ARIANE WU/REVEAL

Unsolved cases are more than just pop culture novelty. They could mean a perpetrator is free to strike again, said Michael Murphy, the coroner in Las Vegas for 13 years until recently joining the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children to run its unknown victims unit.

“This is something that needs attention, and it’s finally getting the attention that it deserves,” he said. “But it is something that’s going to need our attention forever. It’s not something we can just throw a little bit of resources at and think it’s going to go away.”

Despite perceptions that Jane and John Does led risky lifestyles – as runaways, sex workers, undocumented migrants or the homeless – turning up dead and nameless could happen to anyone. Victor Weedn, chair of forensic sciences at The George Washington University, recalls one case from his time as an assistant medical examiner in Maryland from 2009 to 2012.

“I really thought we were going to identify this guy,” he said. “He was fairly well-dressed. Looked like he was fairly well to do. Found floating in a channel. We had very good fingerprints, very good dental, very good DNA, but nothing to match it to.”

That man remains unidentified (http://lostandfound.revealnews.org/?unidentifiedperson=7315) five years later.

Some cases are nothing short of bizarre. In 2001, sheriff’s deputies found the fully clothed skeleton of a man (http://www.riversidesheriff.org/coroner/unidentified/2001-6152.asp) sitting on a hillside overlooking a freeway in Riverside County, California.

He was wearing boots, blue jeans and a leather-trimmed jacket, and officials believe he'd been there for as long as 10 years. To this day, they do not know (http://lostandfound.revealnews.org/?unidentifiedperson=6982) who he is.

A man in Kentucky who'd been struck by a car and killed while walking near an interstate exit ramp in 1994 wasn't identified until last year because his fingerprints were transposed on the wrong index cards, a mix-up that went unnoticed for 20 years.

Due to another fingerprint error, a California woman was erroneously told (http://www.latent-prints.com/press%20demo.htm) in 2002 that her daughter had been found dead in the desert near Las Vegas. The daughter turned up alive weeks later, to the relief of her mother. The victim later was correctly identified as 34-year-old Victoria Gonzalez-Valdez, but her killing remains unsolved.

Three times, Congress has ignored opportunities to do more for the unnamed dead, such as ensure that NamUs is funded into the future and that its contents are combined with the FBI's case information on Jane and John Does.

One 2009 bill (https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/111/hr3695) would have mandated that reports of missing people under the age of 21 be submitted to NamUs when details already had been sent to the National Crime Information Center, the FBI's clearinghouse of data. The proposal died as did another (https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/112/hr1300) two years later. A third proposal (https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/113/s2840) stalled in the last session of Congress. All were sponsored by Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut and dubbed "Billy's Law" for the son of a constituent named Janice Smolinski, who disappeared at age 31 in 2004.

"My 6-foot, 200-pound son was always our protector, and then he goes missing," she said. "It's kind of an eye-opener and shows that it could happen to anyone."

The latest proposed measure was introduced in September 2014 and died when the congressional session ended. It would have required that unidentified remains be reported to the FBI and NamUs within 72 hours as a condition of certain federal dollars.

Murphy's office said in a statement that he would reintroduce the bill for a fourth time this fall.

"I won't stop fighting for this legislation until it becomes law," the statement said.

But even if the bill had been enacted, the law still wouldn't unequivocally mandate that Jane and John Does be reported to federal databases, as experts called for in a landmark 2009 report (http://www.nap.edu/catalog/12589/strengthening-forensic-science-in-the-united-states-a-path-forward) by the National Academy of Sciences.

The report found that more than 2,300 U.S. jurisdictions have widely varying qualifications, staffing and budgets for conducting competent death investigations.

The National Crime Information Center is stuffed with records on everything from stolen guns to suspected terrorists and wanted criminals. It also contains data on the unidentified dead, but there were 8,045 cases in it by January 2014 – 2,400 fewer than are currently in NamUs.

As a graduate student in forensic anthropology at Louisiana State University, Erin McMenamin Hess found in 2008 (http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-06082008-153915/) that the FBI's system was underused, entering case information was tedious and the procedure for matching missing persons to unidentified remains could be unreliable.

"NamUs was such a good option because it didn't just have to be the sheriff's office or the FBI or the medical examiner who was entering information," she said. "Anyone could enter information, and it was then being vetted. So a family member, a friend, an interested party of any kind can enter the information there."

The FBI is so protective of its data on Jane and John Does that the agency refused Reveal access to it despite requests under the Freedom of Information Act. Officials claimed that state and local governments that submitted case information to the FBI were confidential sources under the law.

In the meantime, some states have taken their own actions.

In California, police must report (http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/cgi-bin/displaycode?section=gov&group=27001-28000&file=27520-27521.1) an unidentified body to the state within 10 days. New Jersey requires (http://www.njsp.org/divorg/invest/pdf/mpi-best-practices-protocol-103008.pdf) that police accept any missing persons report without delay and that DNA from families be collected and forwarded to national repositories.

A Louisiana law (https://legis.la.gov/Legis/Law.aspx?d=408699), passed in 2006 following Hurricane Katrina, requires that unidentified remains be sent to the Forensic Anthropology and Computer Enhancement Services Laboratory (http://www.lsu.edu/faceslab/) at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. Lab employees crisscross the state collecting DNA from families of those reported missing to improve the possibility of identification.

"The law enforcement people love us," said Mary Manhein, the lab's former director. "If a body's found in the woods, we go out, we recover it, we profile it, we get a DNA sample from it. We'll get dental records."

A painful wait for identification

For 12 years, Alice Almendarez agonized over the disappearance of her father, but authorities in the Houston area had all they needed to know that 42-year-old John Almendarez was nearby all along.

John Almendarez spent more than a decade as a John Doe before DNA from his daughter helped identify his remains.

CREDIT: COURTESY OF ALICE ALMENDAREZ

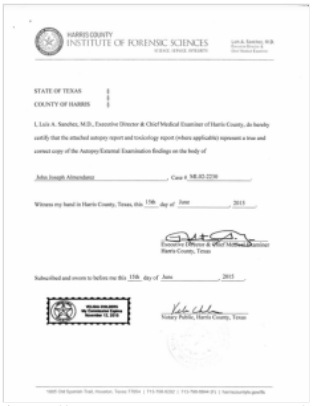
While her father had struggled with alcoholism following her parents' separation, Almendarez said he was no deadbeat. She knew something was amiss when the regular calls he made to his daughters suddenly ceased after Father's Day in 2002. She was 16.

"When I went to the police department, they told me that maybe my father didn't want to be found, or that maybe he turned away from the life he had been living," she said. "So there was never really anything done on their end."

Unbeknownst to his daughter, authorities had pulled John Almendarez's body from Houston's Buffalo Bayou on July 2, 2002. At the Harris County medical examiner's office, he was John Doe No. ML02-2230, the victim of an accidental drowning. In the Houston Police Department's homicide unit, he was "unknown dead man" in report No. 092958302.

READ THE INVESTIGATIVE FILES

Records obtained by Reveal


HARRIS COUNTY
INSTITUTE OF FORENSIC SCIENCES

STATE OF TEXAS
COUNTY OF HARRIS

I, Luis A. Sanchez, M.D., Executive Director & Chief Medical Examiner of Harris County, do hereby certify that the attached autopsy report and toxicology report (where applicable) represent a true and correct copy of the Autopsy/External Examination findings on the body of

John Joseph Almendarez, Case # ME-03-2230

Witness my hand in Harris County, Texas, this 15th day of June 2015

Executive Director & Chief Medical Examiner
Harris County, Texas

Subscribed and sworn to before me this 15th day of June 2015

Notary Public, Harris County, Texas

(http://www.documentcloud.org/search/preview?q=projectid%3A+22070-left-for-dead-the-documents+&slug=projectid-22070-left-for-dead-the-documents&options=%7B%22q%22%3A%22projectid%3A+22070-left-for-dead-the-documents+%22%2C%22container%22%3A%22%23DC-search-projectid-22070-left-for-dead-the-documents%22%2C%22title%22%3A%22%22%2C%22order%22%3

(https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2381689-john-almendarez-medical-examiner-timeline.html) show that on Jan. 7, 2004, his DNA was sent to the Center for Human Identification in Fort Worth. On March 24, 2004, he was buried in a plot at the Harris County Cemetery.

Alice Almendarez returned to the authorities again in 2010 and filed a missing persons report. The case was closed two years later when officials claimed (https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2299386-john-almendarez-police-reports.html) that they could not reach the Almendarez family.

No one connected the dots until last year, when a county forensic anthropologist obtained Alice Almendarez's DNA.

Alice Almendarez spent years searching for her father, unaware that Houston authorities already had his unidentified remains.

CREDIT: JIM FLORES FOR REVEAL

"The crazy thing is, he died in our neighborhood, down the street from where we grew up – not even five minutes away from the house," she said. "Something in me just wouldn't give up."

Officials from the Houston Police Department conceded in an interview that DNA wasn't collected from the Almendarez family in 2010 when they had the chance because it wasn't routine at the time.

"It was after 2010 ... (when) we started advising the families that they had the option to come in and make an appointment for DNA," said Officer Darrin Buse of the department's missing persons unit. "If they call us back and want to have that done, we'll go through that process."

READ THE COLD CASE FILES

Read more from the Houston Chronicle's "Cold Case Files" (//www.houstonchronicle.com/cold-cases/).

Lt. John McGalin of the department's homicide unit said that when the case involves an adult, there must be reasonable suspicion that the person is in danger in order to file a missing persons report with state or federal authorities. Some adults choose to disappear, he added.

"Is it a tragedy what happened to their family? Absolutely, it's a tragedy," he said. "In a perfect world, he would have been identified immediately after he made it to the medical examiner's office. The fact of the matter is that just didn't happen."

Texas law states (http://www.statutes.legis.state.tx.us/Docs/CR/htm/CR.63.htm) that when children and people with dementia are reported missing, police must "immediately start an investigation." Otherwise, the law says only that police must act with due diligence to try to locate the missing person. Unidentified remains and DNA samples from them are supposed to be reported to the state within 10 days, but the law is not always followed (http://www.texasobserver.org/illegal-mass-graves-of-migrant-remains-found-in-south-texas/).

When the call from an anthropologist at the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences finally came, Alice Almendarez couldn't breathe.

"You think you're prepared to hear that your dad is dead after so long," she said. "I actually sometimes would hope that he was, because I didn't want him to be suffering somewhere."

Citizen sleuths take action

For other cases, it's everyday citizens troubled by the failure of authorities to identify victims who press them to take greater action.

When a retired police officer told Deb Anderson, a database manager, about the Jane Doe in her small town of Blue Earth, Minnesota, she couldn't believe someone could die unidentified.

But sure enough, in 2001, she found the headstone for a case that had grown cold over two decades, as local investigators who once worked it were replaced by a new generation.

In this case, the murderer was known long before the victim.

An 18-year-old's body had been discovered in 1980. Eight years later, a Minnesota state trooper named Robert Leroy Nelson confessed (https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2299396-michelle-busha-investigative-file-ii.html#document/p112/a237675) to handcuffing the girl, raping her, pulling off her nails with a pair of pliers as she screamed and strangling her – all while on duty. At the time of his confession, Nelson also admitted to beating and sexually assaulting (https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2299396-michelle-busha-investigative-file-ii.html#document/p211/a237676) his young son over a period of years. He has been in a Texas prison ever since for both crimes. But Nelson said he never knew the name of the woman he brutally killed.

Anderson could find nothing online about "Blue Earth Jane Doe." The sheriff of Faribault County, where Blue Earth is located, offered frustratingly little in response to her inquiries. So she launched what would become a 14-year campaign to identify the woman, an effort that put her at odds with officials from the local sheriff's department, who she claimed dragged their feet.

Along the way, Anderson picked up some investigative skills.

She created a Web page and found an artist to draw the young woman's likeness based on skull X-rays from her original autopsy. She persuaded a company that specializes in mass emails to send thousands of messages describing the case, and she recruited help to cover the costs of an exhumation.

Marla Busha's sister, Michelle Busha – seen here in police sketches – spent more than three decades as "Blue Earth Jane Doe."

CREDIT: MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY

"I didn't know anything about any of this. I didn't know how it worked," Anderson said. "I didn't know about DNA, I didn't know about exhumations and I didn't know about missing persons. ... I knew nothing. It was all just winging it on my part."

She had begun advocating for the woman's exhumation as early as 2003, hoping that at least a facial reconstruction could be completed to help with her identification.

But the unidentified woman wasn't exhumed until last year. In March, DNA from the remains matched a Texas family that had submitted their own swabs (https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2299395-michelle-busha-investigative-file-i.html#document/p25/a237679) to the FBI's Combined DNA Index System, or CODIS, eight years earlier. After years of searching, Anderson finally knew that Blue Earth Jane Doe was Michelle Busha, who'd been hitchhiking through Minnesota at the time of her death. Busha's family had first reported

(https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2299395-michelle-busha-investigative-file-i.html#document/p24/a237680) her missing from their Bay City, Texas, home in May 1980, the year her body was found.

The current Faribault County sheriff, Mike Gormley, and his chief deputy, Scott Adams, said in a recent interview that they couldn't speak for their predecessors but that they met with Anderson to discuss the case shortly after taking over the office in 2007.

"You've got current cases that are always ongoing, we're always busy and there are the financial aspects that come into play. ... I think all the things finally fell into place for us, and everything all lined up," Gormley said.

Gormley nonetheless had told the Faribault County Register (http://www.faribaultcountyregister.com/page/content.detail/id/500153/-cold-case--prints-turned-over-to-FBI.html?nav=5002) in 2008 that he was "not sure we would gain anything" by conducting an exhumation.

Jill Oliveira, a spokeswoman for the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, which was involved with the original investigation, said the agency is aware of 70 other ongoing Jane and John Doe cases across the state today. Nine involve victims who were buried before DNA samples could be collected.

Minnesota lawmakers passed a bill (https://www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/?id=260&year=2006&type=0) in 2006 requiring local coroners and medical examiners to report unknown remains to the state.

Meanwhile, Busha's family brought her home 35 years after her death. They are grateful to Anderson for her commitment to the case. Marla Busha, Michelle's sister, said all those years of not knowing what happened were hardest on their grandmother, who died in 2005.

"When Michelle was missing, it crushed my grandmother," she said. "She went to her grave crying about Michelle."

READ THE INVESTIGATIVE FILES


EVIDENCE RECEIPT

(http://www.documentcloud.org/search/preview?q=projectid%3A+22070-left-for-dead-the-documents+&slug=projectid-22070-left-for-dead-the-documents&options=%7B%22q%22%3A%22projectid%3A+22070-left-for-dead-the-documents+%22%2C%22container%22%3A%22%23DC-search-projectid-22070-left-for-dead-the-documents%22%2C%22title%22%3A%22%22%2C%22order%22%

Few clues about Mountain Jane Doe

The coal industry built Harlan during the early 1900s as rail transportation expanded shipping opportunities for industrialists. On the window of a local beauty shop is a sticker that reads, "If you don't like coal, don't use electricity."

But the coalfields of Appalachia are suffering today, and many of the jobs they once sustained have been replaced by poverty and substance abuse.

Like many other small communities in the United States, Harlan relies on the services of the state police. The Mountain Jane Doe case always has been someone's responsibility at the Kentucky State Police's Post 10. As

detectives retired from the station or were promoted elsewhere, the file's scant contents were passed from one to the next.

Yet the young woman never made it onto the agency's list of official cold cases. To this day, she is not mentioned on the agency's website (http://www.kentuckystatepolice.org/cold_case.html), where the public is asked for help with unsolved killings dating to the 1950s.

"It was one of those that kind of fell through the cracks," said Sgt. Jackie Pickrell of Post 10, who joined the team shoveling dirt from the grave in November. "Now our cases, when we work a murder or even a missing person, they'll take up an entire case drawer. This case is maybe a half-inch thick, if that."

It was the afternoon of June 1, 1969, when Mountain Jane Doe's lifeless body was found by a local man picking flowers for his wife along Little Shepherd Trail, a winding road that grows quieter as it climbs upward and away from Harlan's town center. The coroner determined that she was under 20 years old and slight with auburn hair.

"Her face was completely gone," said Bill Bowman, who was a teenager working in the local hospital when Mountain Jane Doe arrived there. "All you could see was the skull. Her hair was very matted. The color of her skin was a pale to light green, I assume from being out there for so long."

Daily temperatures were in the 70s and 80s. Bowman was instructed to stand with cans of Lysol in each hand and douse the air in an attempt to control the profound smell of decay. Mountain Jane Doe was so decomposed, he said, that little could be accomplished by an autopsy.

The state police believed Mountain Jane Doe had been killed somewhere else and dragged to the edge of Little Shepherd Trail, where a restaurant receipt from Cincinnati was found near her body. While something as simple as a receipt might not seem valuable, it's the kind of clue that can narrow searches for missing persons in the NamUs database. Maybe she was from Ohio or spent time there?

Few additional clues were found, however. Investigators told the Harlan Daily Enterprise that they were pursuing whatever leads they could, but many of the tips were coming from outside Harlan County and even outside the state, from people who'd heard about the case in the news. With no answers forthcoming, Mountain Jane Doe's body was buried across town in a donated casket, in a pauper's grave overlooking Harlan.

Harlan is small enough that the local coroner, Philip Bianchi, doesn't have an office space in the county building, nor – in contrast to state police – are files automatically passed on to incoming coroners as one replaces another. So all these years later, even though he had heard about Mountain Jane Doe, Bianchi had few records from her case.

A now-retired forensic anthropologist for the Office of the Kentucky State Medical Examiner had given Todd Matthews from NamUs a list of the state's unidentified dead. Matthews and Bianchi realized that Mountain

Jane Doe was missing from it, and her addition paved the way for case details to eventually be uploaded to NamUs in 2009 – 40 years after her body was found.

“This is the last hope to reconnect with some of the family that can give us enough information to actually launch a homicide investigation,” Matthews said.

Matthews is doggedly optimistic about successful identifications in such cases, no matter how little information tends to be available. He pointed to a nearby grave on the day of the exhumation and said it’s believed to contain the remains of an unidentified male that he wants to dig up someday, too.

But even less information is available for him than for Mountain Jane Doe. Bianchi said he was told by a retired state police detective that the young man was killed in a car accident outside the county, but he hasn’t been able to confirm anything.

Matthews faced such odds before when he was an amateur who became obsessed with identifying “Tent Girl,” a young woman killed and unknown for three decades in Georgetown, Kentucky.

But eventually, he found an online message board, where someone had posted about a missing sister, a young woman named Barbara Ann Hackmann-Taylor. The post described the woman’s hair, height, eyes, birthday and more – details that seemed to align closely with Tent Girl, named for the canvas tarp found wrapped around her remains.

Authorities discovered the body of “Tent Girl” in Georgetown, Ky., in 1968. Todd Matthews helped identify her as Barbara Ann Hackmann-Taylor three decades later.

CREDIT: COURTESY OF TODD MATTHEWS

Matthews became certain that the two were the same, and DNA obtained from the remains when she was exhumed in 1998 proved him right.

“The obsession was due to what I felt was an obligation,” he said. “Somehow, I felt a kinship with the girl, and I still can’t explain why or how, but I felt like this was more than just a dead body in another state.”

Since then, Matthews has attended five exhumations.

During the November dig at Mountain Jane Doe’s grave, several more pieces of remains were recovered, including two socks full of foot bones known as phalanges. But big bones like the skull and femurs are the most desirable for extracting DNA samples. By the end of the day, the team had those, too.

The remains were then shipped to the Center for Human Identification in Fort Worth, Texas, for forensic analysis.

Unearthing another mystery

Harlan County Coroner Philip Bianchi knew something was wrong.

The second-generation funeral home director had spotted an item that shouldn't have been there when the body came out of the ground. Embalmers know it as a trocar button, used to seal the injection site when special fluids are pumped into a body in preparation for funeral services. Mountain Jane Doe had not been embalmed – she was too badly decomposed and she had been autopsied.

There were other worrisome clues. He had expected a body bag, or least the remnants of one, but none appeared. And once the remains were taken back to his funeral home, before being shipped to Texas, he found what appeared to be part of a clip-on tie and a man's sock.

It wasn't long before Bianchi realized that the team had dug up the wrong body.

Philip Bianchi, Harlan County, Ky.'s elected coroner, is seen graveside at the exhumation last November.

CREDIT: SCOTT ANGER FOR REVEAL

"It was always a possibility in the back of my mind that that may not be the right grave, simply because of the manner in which the graves were marked with just a temporary grave marker that sticks into the ground," he said. "Over the years, I've seen where those things have gotten misplaced, got knocked over. Probably in this case, it had gotten knocked over and put back at the wrong spot."

Authorities now suspect they dug up the unidentified young man who was supposed to have been buried near Mountain Jane Doe. But they won't know more until another exhumation takes place and a new set of remains is compared alongside him. For now, his DNA is in the FBI's index. Bianchi said there are plans to conduct a second exhumation in the future.

“It slowed us down some,” he said. “It certainly wasn’t the results we wanted.”

Darla Jackson, the local historian and mortuary owner, was crestfallen when she learned what had happened. It had been 15 years since she first learned about the case from an aunt, which was one of the reasons why she had stood in the biting air that November day as the bones came up.

Jackson had thought Mountain Jane Doe finally was going to gain back her real name; despite the setback, she has not given up hope.

“She’s in the cemetery and she’s in that area,” she said, “so now we just have to find her.”

Clarification: *This story has been updated to clarify where the Houston Police Department files its missing person reports if it believes a person is in danger.*

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